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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between girls' body size and their intellectual abilities as perceived by their classroom teachers. The study aims to show that girls' body size has a negative relationship to teachers' perception of their intellect, even in the earliest grades where puberty has not yet become a factor in children's development. The study will show that the more overweight the girl, the less intellectually capable her teacher rates her. (Contains 28 references and 3 tables.) (GCP)

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Body Size and Teacher Bias: Exploring Teacher Ability Perceptions of Overweight Girls at the Start of School

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Introduction

The refuge of the fat girl has always been her books. Overweight girls and women are and have been picked last for sports teams, dismissed as suitable prom queens, and left unclothed by the fashion industry where to be a size 10 is to be too big. Yet girls, regardless of their body size, have been allowed to excel academically. Girls who cannot or will not attend to their physical appearance as a way to school recognition depend on their academic performances as a part of a positive identity (Niemi, 2001). Overweight girls depend on teachers to see through the social trappings of the student culture and respect the brains within.

In this study, we examine the relationship between girls' body size and their intellectual abilities as perceived by their classroom teachers. We will show that girls' body size has a negative relationship to teachers' perception of their intellect, even in the earliest grades where puberty has not yet become a factor in children's development. We will show that the more overweight the girl, the less intellectually capable her teacher rates her.

Background

Critical feminist theory supplies the basis for our current understanding of the relationship between body size and gender expectations. Feminist theorists have successfully argued that understanding the self must include the body (Davies, 1989; Martin, 1992; Walkerdine, 1990), and that schools are one such place where we can see how the body is incorporated into interactions where students and teachers vie for power. Too often studies of schooling and the development of the self include analysis of measures of self-esteem and internal measures of worth (Gilligan & Brown, 1992)

without specific attention to how the notion of self plays out in actual interactions, which must occur in the body. Brumberg (1997) goes so far to say that girls' continuous attention to their bodies is "a body project.... [T]he body," she notes, is central to the experience of [being] female . . ." (p. xxv). We submit that the body is central to the experience of being human, and that it is in interaction where we can observe how teachers' beliefs about their students' intellectual capacities are enacted.

Critical feminist theory invites questions of whether any theory can be deemed masculine or feminine. Critical theory includes understanding power and its workings, and should consider gender as well as social class, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation. But critical theorists have excluded analyses of gender in their work in schools too often (Fuller, 1983; McRobbie, 1980, Weedon, 1988). As Weiler (1988) notes:

> Critical educational theory has largely failed to recognize sexism as a significant issue to be addressed . . . existing feminist analyses of schools have too often failed to recognize schools as sites of ongoing struggle over both knowledge and social relationships (p. 4).

When studying the body, we cannot be gender-neutral; all actions are embodied and our bodies live in real social spaces. Critical feminist theory allows us to acknowledge the body and focus on the ways in which the female body is subject to power relations within interaction.

Theories of power and women must also include how weight is perceived in the cultural context. Orbach (1984) states that "fat is a feminist issue" and for the better part of the twentieth century, the "ideal" woman's body size has been growing smaller. A significant body of studies indicates that to be a "perfect" female, one must be thin and

often petite (e.g. Bentley, 1998, Niemi, 200, Pipher, 1994, Wolf, 1994). According to American teenagers, it is now ideal to be 5 feet 7 inches tall and weigh 110 pounds (Brumberg, 1992). We theorize that being large (whether actually fat or just bigger than the cultural expectation of thin) has a negative impact on others' impressions of girls. Academic expectations, we maintain, are specifically linked to girls' size, which in turn in connected, we maintain, to how well girls are allowed to achieve in school.

Literature review

The relationships between students' body sizes and teachers' perceptions of their academic capabilities are complex; neither student nor teacher lives in a socio-cultural vacuum. In this section, we will focus on two areas of the literature regarding schooling and academic success: studies that address how specific aspects of schooling have affected students as seen through their bodies and those that address the phenomenon of teachers' expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies. Further, we will discuss studies which suggest that girls' body size might have an effect on how they are treated within the context of schooling and what, if any, affect this treatment has on girls' power to achieve academic success.

Schooling and students' bodies. There have been a small number of studies where researchers questioned how aspects of schooling might influence the development of children's bodies. Kamler (1993), for example, studied how the texts of classroom songs regulated children's bodies into gendered positions. She found that the "process of regulat[ing children's bodies] appears to be deeply and yet invisibly gendered" (p. 22). Through discourse analysis she showed that teachers considered girls who "sat nicely" as being the "perfect student" (p. 23). Kamler wisely cautioned, however, "it is dangerous

to focus solely on teacher talk . . . because it constructs an overly neat and simple picture" (p. 18). Having other corroborating data, as we do, will help construct a more rounded picture of the relationship between body size and teacher expectations.

Martin (1998) also investigated the construction of gender identity in students' bodies. She, too, found that teacher expectations helped achieve institutional order and that their specific instructions about what children could and could not do with their bodies created fewer choices for girls than for boys.

The ways in which schooling affects girls' and boys' bodies is also addressed significantly in sexual harassment literature (AAUW, 1993; Herr & Anderson, 1996; Lee *et al.*, 1996; Stein, 1999). These authors write about the prevalence of girls' and boys' experiences with unwanted sexual attention, unwanted touching, and unwanted sexual talk. Sexual harassment between students is an under-acknowledged problem, and important work that addresses ways to see it and create respectful and gender-equal school cultures must continue. Yet within sexual harassment literature, there is little that addresses the relationship between students' bodies and their perceived or real academic work. This study begins to investigate this gap.

Teachers' expecations and the self-fulfilling prophecy. Most teachers are aware of the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy, or the idea that "one's expectations about a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that confirm those expectations (Tauber, 1998, p. 1). Sociologist Robert K. Merton first named the phenomenon in 1948, and Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968) widely introduced it to teachers in *Pygmalion in the Classroom*.

Research on teacher expectations since that time illustrates that teachers, like all of us, are quick to use outward impressions to predict another's behavior. Good (1987), for example, showed that teachers form expectations about students based upon "body build, gender, race, ethnicity, given name and/or surname, attractiveness, dialect, or socioeconomic status, among others" (p. 2). Teddlie and Whelan (1991) found a significant negative relationship between students' socio-economic status and teachers' expectations of their academic success.

More recently, Feiler and Webster (1997) investigated teachers' assessments of young students' future literacy success or failure. Using data from interviews with teachers, baseline literacy assessments, and daily reading records, the authors explored the factors that influenced teacher predictions for 30 children. The study showed that teachers formed early judgements about children's future literacy success based on their assessments of parental support such as "parents' verbal skill/fluency, and home address" (p. 12). Students whose parents were perceived as poor were judged as having less chance for reading success than students whose parents were wealthier (p. 12).

There is some evidence to suggest that teachers' expectations of students' academic capacities is linked to students' body size. Staffieri (1967) was among the first to suggest that overweight children are perceived negatively. More specifically with regard to gender, Villimex, Eisernberg & Caroll (1986) found that teacher attributions of competence for older boys was positively related to their large size, whereas teachers negatively related older girls' academic competence to their large size.

The National Education Association (1994) conducted one of the few recent studies of size prejudice in schools. It reported that

> From nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, and sometimes violence. Often ridiculed by their peers, and discouraged by even well-meaning education employees, fat students develop low self-esteem and have limited horizons. They are deprived of places on honor rolls, sports teams, and cheerleading squads and are denied letters of recommendation (p. x).

Our study explores earlier findings that suggest teachers consider overweight girls less smart than their normal-weight or thin classmates. With roughly 30 percent of the United States population classified as obese (JAMA website, 2003), it is fair to assume that roughly one-third of the students in every classroom will also be overweight, as well as one-third of their teachers. Since girls' obesity or overweight status is already a cultural handicap, teachers' lowered expectations of their academic success would be a further detriment to their chances for social power and status equal to that of men's.

Method

Sample

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K) collected data on a nationally representative sample of 21,257 children at the start of kindergarten, 1998. Of these, slightly under half (10,381) were girls. This sample can be considered representative of girls in kindergarten in the United States in 1998.

The design of ECLS-K used entire classrooms of kindergarten children, allowing us to examine the effects of relative size within a classroom, as well as considering normative estimation of size across the full sample. We used all of the girls in the sample

for the full analyses, and then trimmed the sample to exclude cases in which there was (for whatever limitations of survey collection) only one girl in a given classroom, leaving a sample of 9,710 girls for the hierarchical linear modeling analyses.

Measures

Overweight. The critical predictor measure under consideration is a dichotomous identification of a girl as being "overweight." We have considered two different definitions for this identification – a national norm (using our own nationally representative data) and a classroom norm. While the medical definition determines a child overweight based on her body mass index relative to her age, we chose not to consider this indicator because our focus is on teacher perception, which would not necessarily respond to a medical diagnosis, but rather to the appearance of size as a norm.

To determine overweight by the national norm, we do not include age (although it becomes a covariate for our analyses) but rather identify girls who "appear" heavier, based on pounds and height. The use of one standard deviation above this sample mean as the cutoff establishes 15% of the sample in this category, a level supported by curvilinear analysis. Similarly, we use appearance for the classroom determinant, but in this identification we take full advantage of the local context to identify the weight "norm" by using the child's own classroom's average weight per inch of height. Here the one SD cutoff identifies 13% of the girls in the category of "overweight." Interestingly, while seven percent of the total sample of girls were identified as overweight by both standards, seven percent of the girls identified as

overweight by national norms were not overweight for their classroom, and another six percent who were overweight by class standards were not overweight by national norms.

Teacher perception. At the start of kindergarten, every child in the ECLS-K study took tests measuring their reading, mathematics, and general knowledge. Independent of these tests, the teachers of each child provided her[1] evaluation of that child's reading, mathematics and general knowledge level. Because the sample is nationally representative, it is appropriate to anchor both types of assessments to this national average and standard deviation, generating two sets of norm-referenced assessments of early learning skills. By subtracting the tested level from the teacher's assessment, we generate a measure reflecting to what extent, and in which direction, the teacher's view deviates from the external (standardized assessment) measure. When this scale is close to zero (specifically within .1 SD to either side), we conclude that the teacher has a fairly accurate view of the child's performance. We interpret a more positive value to indicate that the teacher sees more in the child's capabilities than shows up on the test. Our concern lies in the negative portion of the scale, an indication that the teacher views the child as less capable than is warranted by an external assessment. We interpret this side of the scale as an indication of negative teacher perception, a bias against the child that could potentially hamper learning during kindergarten.

Covariates. In every analysis, we take into account three critical background factors that may also influence both child weight and teachers' views of a child's ability:

(1) ethnic background, dichotomized as traditionally disadvantaged minority (African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American) compared to not (White/Caucasian, Asian-American);
(2) family socio-economic status, including income, occupational status, parent education, and valued objects in the home;

[1] Almost all of these teachers were female.

(3) age of the child.

Analyses

We examined this issue from two perspectives – the overall pattern of bias across all contexts and the specific classroom context. For the overall examination, we used multiple regression analysis, focusing on the impact of a girl's overweight status on teacher perceptions. For the classroom context, we use a two-level hierarchical linear model (HLM), examining girls within classrooms. For both sets of analyses, we first examine the overall relationship, unadjusted for any additional covariates. We then take into account background differences.

Results

Relationships between Weight and Other Background Characteristics

Being overweight is not independent of other background characteristics. Table 1 shows bivariate comparisons of the background covariates (listed in the first column) for girls who not overweight by either standard (2nd column), were overweight by both national and classroom standards (3rd column), were overweight by classroom but not by national standards (4th column), and were overweight by national but not by classroom standards (5th column). The F statistics testing the difference in level for each group is shown in the final column.

*** Insert Table 1 about here ***

In comparing differences by ethnic minority, the largest proportion (52%) appears in the identification of girls who were overweight by national but not by classroom cutoff standards, while the lowest appears in girls who were overweight by classroom but not

national cutoffs (35%). This difference accounts for the significant contrast appearing as an overall difference between groups.

This comparison, between the group of girls overweight by national but not classroom norms and the group overweight by classroom but not national norms, also mirrors the largest difference in family social class. The first group is on average almost 1/3 of a standard deviation below the average of the second (-.21 SD compared to .09 SD). It is of interest to note that those girls who were not overweight by either cutoff and those who were overweight by both are actually fairly close in family status indicators (.02 SD compared to -.05 SD).

Finally, only one group -- girls who were overweight by national but not classroom standards -- showed a significant difference in age. This group of girls was considerably younger than the others; on average they were about eighteen months younger at the start of 1998. This rather odd finding remains unexplained using other parent data in the analysis.

In general, the phenomenon of a child who is not overweight for the classroom she is in, but is overweight by national norms, reflects the association of background with schooling isolation still found both by ethnic and social class segregation of schools. For these reasons, we take all background characteristics into account for both regression and HLM analyses.

The Impact of Global Overweight Status on Teachers' Perceptions of Aptitude

Table 2 shows multiple regression results on the effect of global overweight status on a teacher's perception of a child's aptitude. The table shows two stages of analysis, divided by the darkened row showing the R-Square. In the first stage, we included only

the dichotomous indicator for "overweight by national standards," while in the second stage, we show the impact of being overweight adjusted for the other background factors. Each column shows a separate regression analysis, conducted on teachers' perception of reading ability, math ability, and general knowledge. Recall that the units for each outcome are standard deviations from the mean, in which a "0" indicates an accurate perception of that child's ability.

Insert Table 2 about Here

These results demonstrate the overall bias against overweight girls using national norms as cutoff.

For perceptions about reading, teachers' views of ability average about .06 SD lower than other girls. The adjustment for other related background indicators accounts for about half of this overall difference, in that after adjusting for other background factors, the effect drops to .03 SD. However, this difference is still significant.

For perceptions about mathematics ability, the negative bias held by teachers does not alter after taking other background factors into account. For both analyses, the impact of overweight status is small (-.03) but significant. Here too, teachers have a slight bias against overweight girls, considering their ability in mathematics somewhat lower than their actual tested performance would warrant.

For teachers' perceptions of girls' general knowledge, not only do background factors not alter the negative relationship, but the initial difference (-.04 SD) actually becomes slightly larger (-.05 SD) after taking other covariates into account. These differences are small, but are large enough to be significant, as well as noticed by children.

In general, these results demonstrate that teachers do appear to use a girl's size to form initial views about that child's ability. The negative bias observed for all three learning domains -- reading, math, and general knowledge -- are not large in themselves, but given the deviation from a child's true performance on external indicators, they are likely large enough to be noted by the child. The extent to which these negative views become internalized remain open for investigation.

The Effect of Classroom Overweight Status on Teachers' Perceptions of Girl's Ability

Table 3 shows HLM results on the effect of classroom overweight status on a teacher's perception of a child's aptitude. As with the regression analysis, we conducted this approach in two stages, divided by the darkened row. In the first stage, only the identification of a child as overweight relative to her classroom average was included. In the second stage, additional background characteristics are taken into account. Each column of the table shows a separate HLM analysis -- conducted on teachers' perceptions of the child's reading ability, mathematics ability, and general knowledge.

Insert Table 3 about here

The results here mirror those using a global perspective. More importantly, the effects observed for two of the three outcomes (mathematics and general knowledge) are larger than those observed in the global analysis , while they remain about the same size for reading. In addition, for both mathematics and teacher's perception of general knowledge, the observed differences between overweight and non-overweight girls grew larger after taking other background characteristics into account.

We consider the size of the difference in teacher perceptions for general knowledge especially troubling. After adjusting for other background factors, teachers

on average maintain more than 1/5 SD lower perceptions of these girls' general knowledge. Recall that these perceptions are referenced on the objective measure, with negative views reflecting lower estimates than are warranted by tested performance. In short, teachers feel these girls do not know as much as they really do -- they are biased against these girls based on their size.

The relationships observed in these analyses function more like the experiences of the overweight girl than would be the case for our earlier global comparisons. The experience of being the largest is a local one -- the biggest girl in the class has a sense of self more proximate to her peers than to a national standard of size. Here, too, are where the judgements of teachers more likely to be functioning. Except at the extremes of obesity, an adult in a classroom of children tends to make relativistic assessments of how well a child is doing, as well as how large a child appears. It is in this local context that teachers' negative bias against overweight girls becomes the most clear.

Conclusion

Being judged as overweight clearly has implications beyond the social realm. Our analyses show that teachers systematically judge overweight girls to be less academically capable than their actual ability, and do this more than they do smaller girls. Even after adjusting for other background factors, our results are still significant, both statistically and as experienced by the girls themselves. These results indicate a systematic downward shift in

Additional study is needed to explore potential consequences of this bias. If a girl perceives that "my teacher thinks I'm stupid," the chance that this girl will live down to this perception is all too possible. Coupled with her disadvantage of being overweight in

a culture that prizes extreme thinness in women, the overweight girl in school may no longer have academics as her refuge.

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Table 1: Comparing Background Differences for Overweight Girls by Different Cutoffs

Background Characteristic	Not Overweight by either cutoff	Overweight by both cutoffs	Overweight by Classroom but not by National cutoffs	Overweight by National but not by Classroom cutoffs	F
Percent of total sample	80%	7%	6%	7%	
% Disadvantaged Minority	38%	43%	35%	52%	21.5***
Family Socio-Economic Status (zscore)	.02	-.05	.09	-.21	19.3***
Age (months)	67.9	68.9	68.4	50.4	642***

*** $p < .001$

Table 2: Overall Effect of Overweight Status on Teachers' Perception of Ability

Background Characteristic	Teacher Perception of Reading Ability	Teacher Perception of Math Ability	Teacher Perception of General Knowledge
Overweight - No Covariates	-.06***	-.03*	-.10***
R-square	.003***	.001**	.001***
Overweight - including Covariates	-.03**	-.03**	-.05***
Disadvantaged Minority	.10***	.06***	.20***
Family Socio-Economic Status (zscore)	.15***	.20***	.13***
Age (months)	.16***	.05***	.05***
R-square	.26***	.23***	.23***

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Table 3: Classroom Effect of Overweight Status on Teachers' Perception of Ability

Background Characteristic	Teacher Perception of Reading Ability	Teacher Perception of Math Ability	Teacher Perception of General Knowledge
Overweight - No Covariates	-.04*	-.06*	-.16***
% Variance Explained – Within – Between	.02 .02	.07 .02	.18 .06
Overweight - including Covariates	-.04*	-.10**	-.22***
Disadvantaged Minority	.19***	.14**	.28***
Family Socio-Economic Status (zscore)	.12**	.18***	.16***
Age (months)	.12***	.01	.11**
% Variance Explained – Within – Between	.30 .31	.21 .18	.46 .32

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